

Body Language: A Sign of ROK-Japan Relations

by Stephanie Nayoung Kang

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At the APEC Economic Leaders Meeting in Bali earlier this month, there was no missing the cold atmosphere between ROK President Park Geun-hye and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. Their frosty interactions were like a scene from a Korean drama, especially when contrasted with the warmth shared between Park and Chinese leader Xi Jinping. The body language of the two leaders tells a lot about the current state of ROK-Japan relations.

In a recent meeting with US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in Seoul, President Park criticized Tokyo noting, “trust has not been established due to the (Japanese) leadership which has repeatedly made regressive remarks” on unresolved historical and territorial issues. Although the South Korean government recognizes the important role that Japan plays in maintaining regional security, outstanding political issues prevent meaningful dialogue and resolution. South Korean leaders are reluctant to take steps to improve ROK-Japan bilateral relations as sensitivities toward the comfort women issue, disputes over Dokdo/Takeshima, and controversial textbooks in Japan fuel negative perceptions of Tokyo in South Korean media and the public. A hard line toward Japan is a safe policy for any South Korean administration looking for domestic support.

The 2+2 Rings Alarms in Seoul

The US-Japan Security Consultative Committee (SCC) meeting – also known as the US-Japan 2+2 – in Tokyo on Oct. 3 compounded South Korean concerns. The first alarm was Tokyo’s call for an increased defense budget, which South Koreans view as the prelude to a Japanese military buildup. The Ministry of Defense requested a ¥4.819 trillion (\$49 billion) budget, a rise in Japanese military spending not seen since the end of the Persian Gulf War.

Another concern for South Korea is Abe’s desire to lift the ban on the exercise of Japan’s right to collective self-defense. The Japanese government strictly interprets Article 9 of its constitution as a ban on the use force in excess of self-defense, but the Abe administration has made repeated calls to reinterpret Japan’s right to engage in military action to protect allies.

Finally, Washington’s endorsement of an expanded Japanese role in regional security and calls for increased burden sharing by its Northeast Asian allies raise doubts about US commitment to the region. Seoul sees US commitment as a zero-sum game, where attention to one alliance detracts from the other. South Korea and Japan watch anxiously as the

Obama administration juggles domestic crises with its rebalance policy to Asia.

Seoul’s concerns are misguided. Japan’s plan to increase military capabilities trigger insecurity in the ROK even though such capabilities are aimed primarily at North Korea and no one in South Korea truly believes Japan will use them against the South. Tokyo’s decisions to establish a National Security Council and issue a National Security Strategy are seen as threatening by South Koreans who view them as anticipating a militarization of Japan’s security policymaking process. These fears of Japan’s expanding security role are exaggerated. Domestic political and legal constraints in Japan will continue to hinder any significant changes to its peace constitution, and Washington and Tokyo have reiterated that Japan’s expanded role falls under the framework of the US-Japan alliance. The Abe administration’s proposed defense spending increase is the first increase since 2003 and remains under the informal 1percent of GDP cap. Additionally, Japan’s military capabilities are defensive by nature – including surveillance, intelligence gathering, and missile defense. South Korean images of Japanese rearmament have little basis in fact.

South Korea also sees loosening restrictions on the exercise of Japan’s right to collective self-defense as a threat to regional stability. Japan’s expanding role in the region troubles China, which looks at Japan as a challenger to its regional ambitions, alone or in concert with the US. Seoul believes Beijing plays a key role in ROK policies toward Pyongyang and fears that Tokyo’s expansion will raise the price of Chinese cooperation in dealing with the North. While Beijing’s cooperation in dealing with the North is important, Seoul should not be tied down by Chinese demands.

Amidst debates over the OPCON transfer deadline and a rekindled North Korean nuclear threat, Seoul feels vulnerable and may question the attention Japan is receiving, especially given Washington’s enthusiasm for expanding the US-Japan alliance. Seoul sees Tokyo as a competitor for US attention, and tends to fall into a zero-sum approach when dealing with Washington. In truth, the US supports an increased regional role for South Korea as well in a broader effort to increase burden sharing by its East Asian allies. Secretary Hagel’s visit to Seoul on Oct. 1 solidified the US commitment to the US-ROK alliance and plans were made to increase deterrence against North Korean threats.

Toward Warming Relations and Trilateral Cooperation

There are several steps that South Korea, Japan, and the United States should take to mend ROK-Japan relations and increase security cooperation and dialogue among the three countries.

The Park administration should first extend a hand to Japan to increase dialogue and transparency as part of its

'trustpolitik' – a foreign policy framework aimed at building trust between the two Koreas and the countries of the region. One major area of security cooperation for the two countries is important intelligence sharing agreements, such as the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA) and Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). North Korea's recent provocations highlight the need to share essential intelligence and information. Last June, negotiations to sign the GSOMIA fell apart at the final hour amid public outcry against a suspected backroom deal between Seoul and Tokyo. Although unresolved historical issues continue to dominate South Korean media and block meaningful progress in ROK-Japan relations, the ROK government should revise its hard line stance against Japan.

The Park administration has both the political capital and public support to improve bilateral relations. According to a public opinion survey conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies from Aug. 30-Sept. 1, 58 percent of the South Korean public – across a spectrum of ideological camps and ages – supported a Park-Abe summit without any preconditions. In addition, the number of South Koreans that viewed GSOMIA as necessary rose significantly from 44.3 percent in 2012 to 60.4 percent in September 2013. In a recent Wall Street Journal article, Karl Friedhoff similarly argues that Park's relatively high public approval rating, over 60 percent, gives her the political capital to push a more balanced policy toward Japan. Rather than riding on negative perceptions of Japan, President Park should present an honest case for improving relations with Tokyo and hold a summit between the two leaders.

Any effort to improve ROK-Japan bilateral relations must be a two-way street. Even though Prime Minister Abe has made verbal commitments to repair Tokyo's relations with its regional neighbors, his actions leave doubts. Because Seoul is highly suspicious of Tokyo's expanding security role in the region, the Abe Cabinet should make Japanese intentions more transparent. The Japanese government should continue joint studies with its neighbors aimed at reconciling history. Abe must also rein in Cabinet members from making insensitive statements in the press and find new ways to honor Japan's deceased soldiers, such as visiting Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery instead of the controversial Yasukuni Shrine.

Progress in ROK-Japan relations will also depend on the US playing the role of honest broker. Washington should take a more active role in pushing its allies together. Instead of voicing concerns to the US, South Korean and Japanese leaders should have frank discussions within a trilateral framework. A clear mutual understanding of common threats and Japanese intentions can ease doubts in South Korea and start the process of trust-building that Park envisions.

In a recent US-ROK-Japan trilateral dialogue, Korean and Japanese officials each complained of a lack of transparency in the other's alliance relationship with the US. Such discussions on the working level are essential for building mutual trust and understanding defense policies. The US-ROK-Japan should conduct similar dialogues on China's role and how to address the North Korean issue. US-ROK-Japan trilateral meetings should be institutionalized and receive

high-level support and recognition to effectively influence foreign policy initiatives. The three governments should take advantage of international summits and meetings to hold top level trilateral consultations on the sidelines and build on dialogues on the operational and working level, such as the Steering Group, to encourage trust-building between Seoul and Tokyo. Perhaps relationships of trust can be formed from simple warm gestures – anything is better than a cold shoulder.

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